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# Historical Society

OF

## Southern California

Los Angeles, California

1907-1908

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### THE BATTLE OF SAN DIEGO.

BY MILLARD F. HUDSON.

The Southwestern corner of the United States, though never the scene of large military operations, has nevertheless the unique distinction of having been the scene of two important and interesting episodes: Its metropolis, San Diego, saw the first armed conflict between Spaniards and Americans, and near it was fought the battle of San Pasqual, the bloodiest engagement, in California, of the Mexican War. The first named event, forming the subject of this sketch, occurred in 1803, and was a pitched battle between the officers and crew of the Boston brig, *Lelia Byrd*, then on a trading voyage round the world, and the entire force of the Spanish military establishment of San Diego intrenched behind earthworks at the entrance to San Diego Bay. The result was a victory for the American ship, and although the conflict was brief, the resourcefulness and courage which so highly distinguished the American sailor of that day were highly exemplified. The story is one which deserves to be better known as a plain indication of manifest destiny.

The trouble was all about some otter skins.

On the coming of the first Spanish settlers, late in the Eighteenth Century, this valuable marine animal was found to be abundant along the bays and coves of the Pacific, from San Francisco to Cape St. Lucas. The Indians utilized its fur to some extent, paddling out on their *bolsas* made of tule and shooting an otter now and then with their bows and arrows; but they were not sufficiently expert or zealous hunters to capture many of the alert little animals, which

continued to increase in numbers. The Franciscan missionaries, however, were enterprising and successful traders, and they soon taught the Indians improved methods of hunting and stimulated them to greater activity. They thus became the fathers of the fur trade in both the Californias, and were directed in the royal *cédula* of 1785 to collect the skins from the natives and deliver them to the royal commissioner sent to take charge of the traffic, at a fixed tariff of prices.

This commissioner was Don Vicente Basadre y Vega, and he came up to the Californias from San Blas in 1786 to take charge of the government monopoly in the fur trade, consistently with Spain's traditional policy of reserving for the royal treasury all the most valuable resources of her colonies. It was designed to open a trade between the Californias and China, buying the furs at low prices from the missionaries and shipping them to the Philippines, there to be exchanged with the Chinese for quicksilver. On his first trip Don Vicente secured 1600 skins and in four years bought and shipped to Manila 9729 skins at a total cost of \$87,699—almost exactly \$9 each; but in 1790 the enterprise was abandoned and the commissioner returned home to Spain.

The reasons for this failure were several, but it was largely due to the lack of experience and skill of the Spaniards in handling the furs. It is said, also, that the quality of the furs was slightly inferior to those found in colder climes. The opening of this market, however, even though for but a short time, greatly stimulated the business of otter hunting. Many of the Indian neophytes became fairly expert in the chase, and the missionaries continued to buy the pelts, which they sent to San Blas for transport to the Philippines.

Early in the Nineteenth Century the Yankee trader began to cast his shadow before him and his advent caused a thrill of terror in the breasts of the Spanish officials. They were struggling with the difficult problem of holding unbroken a long, thin line of weak military posts, menaced on the north by the Russians, and from the ocean, as they believed, by England. Knowing their own weakness, they looked with jealousy and suspicion upon the infrequent visiting ships of other nations and were inclined to enforce rigidly the strict trade regulations against them. In 1792, 1793 and 1794, Captain George Vancouver, of the British navy, paid the Spanish establishments three several visits and explored the Pacific Coast from Cape Mendocino to San Diego, creating consternation in officialdom by his demands upon their courtesy and by his unavoidable discovery of the defenseless condition of the country. After this event the question of strengthening the military was taken up again with renewed vigor and the viceroy was prevailed upon to make some

concessions. Among other things, he authorized the construction of a fort on Point Guijarros, a long, low, sand-spit commanding the entrance to San Diego Harbor. Vancouver's quick eye had noted the absence of fortifications at this place, and he had expressed his wonder thereat, shrewdly and correctly opining that it was the strategic point for the command of the harbor. These works were commenced in 1795 and continued in a leisurely way for several years.

The first foreign vessel to enter San Diego Bay was that of Vancouver, in 1793. Five years later there suddenly appeared four American sailors, who had been left by a Boston vessel on the Lower California coast and came to the northern port in search of passage home. While waiting for a vessel to take them to San Blas, they earned board by working on the fortifications. These were the first Americans to set foot on the shores of San Diego Bay. The first American ship to appear was the *Betsy*, Captain Charles Winship, which came in August, 1800, remained ten days and obtained wood and water. The next was the *Enterprise*, of New York, Captain Ezekiel Hubbell, which put in for supplies in June of the following year. After these, visitors began to be comparatively frequent at all the California ports, most of them Americans, and the Spanish officials were often driven to their wits ends to temper official severity with personal courtesy. The English ships were feared because of the uncertainty about the designs of the English, frequent rumors of war with that country percolating to the far-off frontier and keeping it in a state of alarm and suspense. But the Yankees were not so much feared as regarded with alarm and suspicion; they were an unknown quantity, people whose motives were hard to fathom and who, for that and other reasons, were to be kept at arm's length. One of the most disturbing things about these amazing Yankees was the fact that all their ships carried guns, in some cases heavier and more numerous than any of which the harbor forts could boast. For example, the *Enterprise*, carried ten guns and twenty-one men; and though her errand seemed harmless enough, who could tell what mischief she might be contemplating?

But if the beginnings of this foreign trade alarmed and annoyed the officials, the effect upon the *frailies* and the scanty civil population was far otherwise. The lives of the former, associated as they were year after year almost exclusively with Indians, was inexpressibly monotonous and trying, and endurable only to men consecrated to missionary labors. The lives of the soldiers and of the few civilians were scarcely less narrow and monotonous. The annual supply ship from Mexico, while eagerly looked forward to, was but a nine days wonder, and nothing to compare with the coming of the mysterious Yankees, with their strange dress and

language. The Spanish *frailes*, too, were as a rule men of education and refinement, while the military were uneducated peasants with the exception of the few officers, who were mostly soldiers of fortune. It was, therefore, a source of joy to these cultured missionaries when men of education, intelligence, and refinement began to visit the country, even though of an alien race and a different religion. The Yankee ships, laden with the products of New England ingenuity, were bound for any port where bargains might be found; and it was small wonder if it soon began to be whispered about, outside official circles, that they carried Yankee notions which they were willing to exchange for otter skins, on the sly. The royal *cédula* of 1785 had forbidden all trade in furs by private persons, and declared it contraband. When the commissioner was withdrawn, the missionaries continued to collect and ship the furs; and while they made a fair profit in the trade, it would have been strange, indeed, if, while casting a speculative eye upon the Yankee ships, the possibility of finding a better market in them, with quicker returns, had not occurred to them. The *frailes* were but men, and liked to drive a good bargain, while the soldiers were miserably paid and glad of any chance to make a small addition to their incomes. In brief, it was not long before a flourishing contraband trade sprang up with these ships, in which missionaries, soldiers, civilians, and Indians were interested, and which the officials strove in vain to check—when they did not wink at or privately engage in it themselves.

The first ship to do a thoroughly satisfactory stroke of business in this line was the *Dromio*, of Boston, which anchored in the bay of Todos Santos, where the city of Ensenada now stands, in 1807, and where swarms of Indians came from the near-by mission of San Miguel bearing otter skins to trade. Lower California soon became the headquarters of this trade, the otters being plentiful and the administration lax. But before the *Dromio* made this lucky haul, at least two American ships (the first to try the fur trade at that port) had suffered loss and damage at the hands of a San Diego commandant and the "Battle of San Diego" had been fought.

On the 26th day of February, 1803, the ship *Alexander*, of Boston, Captain John Brown, dropped anchor in San Diego Bay and asked permission to remain for a time, on the plea that members of the crew were sick with scurvy. Eight days were granted them by the commandant, the sick were allowed to land at a little distance from the fort, and fresh provisions were supplied. All went well for a time, and Captain Brown did a thriving trade with soldiers and Indians in otter skins; but on the evening of the fifth day the commandant, who seems to have known pretty well, or at least to have had strong suspicions, of what was going on, suddenly sent on

board an officer with an armed force and searched the ship. This raid was made, so Captain Brown complained, by an armed rabble, without first demanding the surrender of the skins; and he also claimed that he was treated roughly by the soldiers, who helped themselves to all the furs they could find, whether taken on board at San Diego or elsewhere, and who also carried away a quantity of merchandise which was not contraband and to which they had no right—in short, that his ship was plundered. But the search brought to light four hundred and ninety-one otter skins, which were clearly contraband, and were at once confiscated. There is some ground for the suspicion that the Yankee Captain's touching tale of sailors sick with scurvy was only a Yankee trick. But although he complained, grumbling could not save him from the loss of the skins nor from having to leave San Diego Bay immediately, by the commandant's orders.

The commandant of the San Diego presidial establishment at that time was Don Manuel Rodriguez, who had come to California as a young *alférez*, or lieutenant, and risen to the command of the port. He was a vain, pompous, and officious man, intent on keeping the foreign captains strictly within the limits of their few privileges, and especially zealous in trying to suppress private trading in furs. With the skins seized from the *Alexander* and those previously gathered from other sources, he now had on hand about a thousand confiscated otter skins.

The *Lelia Byrd* was the property of Captain Richard J. Cleveland, a native and resident of Salem, Massachusetts. He had been a sailor from his youth and in 1799 started on a four years' voyage to China and India and back, by way of the Northwest Coast, in which he made a fortune. Upon returning from this cruise, he became the owner of the *Lelia Byrd*, fitted her out at Hamburg, loaded her with merchandise, and started on another voyage with William Shaler as captain and himself as second officer. Both Cleveland and Shaler were fine types of the American captains of the day, enterprising and resourceful; and Cleveland, in particular, was a man of quite unusual refinement, fortitude, and moral courage. At a port to the south they heard that the commandant at San Diego had some otter skins which they could probably buy. They had succeeded in securing sixteen hundred skins on the lower coast and, being on their way to China, were anxious to increase their stock, and accordingly sailed for San Diego in the hope of doing some business at that place.

On the evening of the 17th day of March, the *Lelia Byrd* sailed boldly past Fort Guijarros and came to anchor in the harbor. The following morning the commandant came down on the shore abreast of the ship, with an escort of twelve dragoons, and requested that

a boat be sent to take him on board. To the surprise of the Americans, he crowded all his escort into the boat and brought them on board, and probably "regretted the necessity of leaving on shore his horses," as Cleveland sarcastically remarked. Having come over the ship's side and saluted, he waited while his escort formed in two lines, with doffed hats in one hand and drawn swords in the other, and then passed ceremoniously through the lines to the companionway. "His dress and every movement," declares Cleveland, "evinced the most arrant coxcomb," and he seems to have made himself, from the first, very offensive to the plain Americans. Having inquired as to their home port, destination, and the objects of their cruise, he had a minute taken of the supplies which they required and which he agreed to furnish; he added, however, that he should expect them to quit the port immediately upon their wants being supplied, and gave warning that no trading would be permitted; he forbade the Americans to visit the town, but gave them leave to go on shore in the neighborhood of the anchorage. With this he pompously took his leave and went ashore, but left behind five of his escort, whom he detailed to remain on the ship and act as a guard to prevent contraband trading.

The officers and crew of the *Lelia Byrd* availed themselves of the permission to go on shore and, finding no one at the fort, examined it with some care. It was an earthworks with plank and stone magazine at the rear. The battery consisted of eight brass nine-pounder guns, in working order and with plenty of ammunition. Returning to the ship, they made the acquaintance of the sergeant of the guard, who proved communicative, related the incident of the *Alexander*, and told them about the store of confiscated skins in the possession of the commandant. This was encouraging and led the Americans to hope their visit might not be fruitless; but when they applied to Rodriguez to purchase the furs, he not only refused to consider their proposals, but made it plain that he expected a literal compliance with his demand that they should leave the harbor without delay. This turn of affairs surprised and disgusted the Americans, who had come with the intention of doing open, legitimate trading.

But another visit on shore raised the hope that a few skins might be had, if not with the consent of the commandant, then without it. The corporal in charge of the battery at the fort, Jose Velasquez, informed the Americans that a few skins might be obtained from private parties, if taken on board at night, and this the Americans arranged to do. Two boats were sent to appointed places on shore that night, one which returned safely with a few furs, but the other, with the mate and two men, failed to return.

The supplies, consisting of three head of cattle, two dozen poultry, and a quantity of flour and salt, had been taken on board, and during

the day Commandant Rodriguez had paid the ship a second pompous visit to receive his pay for them; at the same time he ordered the Americans to leave the next day, and wished them a pleasant voyage. But the commandant was an active and suspicious man, and after his experience with the *Alexander*, the *Lelia Byrd* lay heavily on his mind. That evening, at the head of a party of horsemen, he set out to make a round of that part of the beach in the neighborhood of the anchorage and fort. His vigilance was soon rewarded, for in the darkness he came upon the crew of one of the ship's boats in the act of bartering with a civilian for some otter skins. The sailors were at once arrested, bound hand and foot, and left lying on the sand all night in charge of a guard of three men. The commandant proceeded on his way and at the fort found some goods which had been left there in payment for a lot of forty otter skins, and these goods he seized.

The action of the commandant in leaving the prisoners lying on the beach all night was barbarous, notwithstanding the pleasant weather and the mildness of the climate; for, even though they did not suffer from cold, their limbs became much cramped and chafed from the roughly-tied cords. There was a guard-house at the Presidio, three miles away, where it would have been easy to take the prisoners and where they might have been freed from their bonds, even though they were not given beds. But the most amazing thing was, that the commandant should leave his prisoners so near the ship, apparently without a thought of what their comrades would do when they discovered their predicament. Apparently he had so contemptuous an opinion of the Americans as to suppose that they would tamely submit to whatsoever indignity he might choose to inflict. Had he taken the precaution to remove the prisoners to the guard-house, it would have given him an advantage in the conflict which followed and the outcome might have been very different, as Cleveland and Shaler would scarcely have departed without rescuing their men, either by force, or strategy.

When morning came and the plight of the second boat's crew was discovered, the officers of the *Lelia Byrd* took energetic action.

The choice presented them was, as they conceived it, between submission to plundering and indignant treatment, and hazarding the consequences of resistance. Without a moment's hesitation they adopted the latter alternative. While the commandant was assembling the outward symbols of his state and preparing to ride over and search the ship at his leisure, Cleveland and Shaler formed and executed their plans. The Spanish guard on the ship were first of all disarmed and compelled to go below; then Captain Cleveland got into a boat with four men, each armed with a brace of loaded pistols, and pulled ashore. The guard, judging by Cleveland's account, seem to have been taken completely by surprise and to have made



no resistance whatever: "On landing (he wrote), we ran up to the guard, and, presenting our pistols, ordered them instantly to release our men from their ligatures. \* \* \* This order was readily complied with by the three soldiers, who had been guarding them; and, to prevent mischief, we took away their arms, dipped them in the water, and left them on the beach."

Everybody, from the commandant down, seems to have rested serenely in the assumption that the Americans could not and would not make any resistance, and all were completely taken by surprise. By the time the commandant hove in sight, the Americans were safe on board the ship. One of the guard had the presence of mind to run to the fort and give warning that the Americans were about to escape without putting the guard on shore. The alarm quickly spread, and soon the commandant himself came raging down to the fort, with the whole population, both soldiers and citizens, at his heels.

It was now necessary for the Americans to make their escape as quickly as possible. The crew were full of fight, but they were only fifteen all told, and the ship's armament consisted of only six three-pounders, far inferior in both range and effectiveness to the guns in the fort. They knew they were taking desperate chances, and that the battery, if efficiently handled, was sufficient to sink the ship. The service was not efficient, however, as the sequel proved. There were probably forty soldiers at the Presidio, and the total population in 1800 was returned as one hundred and sixty-seven men, women, and children. The greater part of this population now came running from the town to the fort; but the members of the battery were the only ones who counted, the remainder being mere sightseers.

The difficulties and disadvantages with which the Americans had to contend in running the battery were many. The channel is narrow and they would be obliged to pass within musket shot of the fort. Some precious time was necessarily consumed in hoisting the anchor and getting up sail, and this gave the Spaniards plenty of time to prepare for the conflict. There was only a light land breeze blowing, the tide was running in, and the brig was slow in getting under way. As soon as the sailors had loosed the sails and began to heave up the anchor, a blank shot was fired from the fort and the Spanish flag hoisted. This having no effect, a nine-pound solid shot was fired across the ship's bows; but, with all sail set, she continued to draw near the fort.

In the hope of restraining the fire from the fort and thus preventing bloodshed, the Americans now compelled the Spanish guard, in their uniforms, to stand in the most exposed and conspicuous stations in the ship, where they frantically but vainly pleaded with

their countrymen to cease firing, and fell upon their faces on the deck at each discharge. This continued, according to Cleveland's estimate, for three-quarters of an hour, before the slow-moving ship came within range of the fort and opened fire. The Americans then fired two broadsides; at the first, they saw numbers of people scrambling up the wall at the back of the fort and running away, and at the second, they were no longer able to see anyone in the fort, except one soldier, who stood on the ramparts and waved his hat.

Safe out of the harbor, preparations were made for putting the guard on shore. While their arms were being tied in bundles and the boat hoisted out, the poor fellows were making a ludicrous exhibition of their fears and never ceased to implore for mercy. Upon being set on shore unharmed, they seemed transported with joy, and proceeded to relieve their feelings by embracing each other, crossing themselves, falling on their knees in prayer, and finally springing up and shouting: "*Vivan, vivan los Americanos!*"

There is no record of any blood being shed in this "Battle of San Diego," but the *Lelia Byrd* was considerably damaged. Her rigging was struck several times early in the action, and while abreast of the fort several balls struck her hull; one of these pierced her "between wind and water." There is no doubt that Corporal Velasquez and his men did everything in their power to sink the ship. Besides the stimulating presence of the fiery commandant, the corporal probably thought it prudent, in view of his previous conduct, to make a record of extenuating zeal. Cleveland expressed the opinion that the corporal offered them the skins treacherously, by order of the commandant; or, as he says, "expressly to decoy us, that he might have an apology to plunder us." But Rodriguez, notwithstanding his officiousness and pomposity, was hardly a man of such bad character as Cleveland believed. It is also a fact (of which Cleveland was probably not aware) that Velasquez was arrested for his complicity in the contraband trading. This arrest was on commercial and not legal grounds, the bone of contention being the goods found in the fort and confiscated by the commandant. The corporal contended there had been merely a little exchange of gifts between himself and the sailors, and that the commandant himself had accepted similar gifts; but the goods were sold for a sum equivalent to \$212. It is somewhat amusing to find, in the voluminous correspondence over this affair, the venerable Fray Antonio Peyri, founder of the Mission of San Luis Rey, writing to ask for the return of one hundred and seventy otter skins which his Indian neophytes had smuggled on board the *Alexander*—perhaps by his own direction—and that this request was refused. But it gives one a shock, even at this late day, to learn that the furs which were the cause of so much trouble never did anyone any good, but rotted before they could be legally dis-

posed of, and were thrown into the sea! How much better to have allowed the poor otters to swim the sea unmolested!

The Americans now returned to the Lower California coast and put into San Quintin for repairs, where they found Captain Brown and the *Alexander*, and had an "experience meeting" at which the adventures of the two ships were related at length and mutual grievances discussed. The *Alexander* soon departed for the Northwest coast, and a few days later there appeared at San Quintin a jolly company of *frailes* from different missions in the vicinity, who came for the privilege of talking with the Americans, and camped on the shore. So pleasant was their company found that the *frailes* persuaded the Americans to prolong their stay a week after they were ready to sail, and, finding that they were becoming short of water, sent their Indian servants a long distance into the interior to bring a fresh supply. So far from blaming the Americans for their part in the affair at San Diego, the *frailes* sympathized heartily with their view of the case and were loud in their denunciation of the San Diego commandant. It seems that a courier had been dispatched to the various missions along the coast with a letter containing an account of the affair, in which, strangely enough, the commandant was blamed and the gallantry of the Americans, as well as their magnanimity in ceasing their fire and in setting the guard safely on shore, were highly eulogized. This letter preceded the ship down the coast, so that the Americans found that the noise of their exploit had gone before them, and always in a form very much to their credit. Indeed, the excitement caused by the affair had not yet died out when Richard Henry Dana came to the Pacific Coast thirty-three years later, as he afterward bore strong testimony.

The *Lelia Byrd* went on her way at last and circumnavigated the globe. Captain Shaler died in 1830, while United States Consul at Havana, and Cleveland was Vice-Consul under him at that time. The latter lived to see the otters exterminated by the eager American hunters, and other battles between Americans and Spaniards fought at San Diego and elsewhere, as the result of which Upper California became one of the United States. In 1842 he published his reminiscences, in which the story of the "Battle of San Diego" was vividly told. He lived to be almost eighty-seven, and died at Danvers, Massachusetts, in 1860. He and Shaler may be said to have been among the finest types of the American sea captains of an heroic age. Their old antagonist, Rodriguez, was sent to Mexico in 1807, and died there in 1810. The otters are all long since gone, and only crumbling ruins mark the scenes of the labors of the devoted missionaries. Today there stands on old Point Guajarro, now called Ballast Point, a government lighthouse, and,

near by on the mainland, the new Fort Rosecrans, forming part of the defenses of San Diego Harbor. In the construction of these works the old Spanish fort was demolished, and even the old stone magazine in the rear removed. Probably few of those whose homes now look out across the beautiful land-locked harbor know the story of the "Battle of San Diego," and it is needful that the heroic deeds of the men of the past should be remembered.